where the colors are

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where the colors are

by museaway

Summary

After Clark rescues Lex from Belle Reve, they flee to Canada to start a new life. Although his age and the need for discretion limit his options, Clark does his best to support them. But despite Clark's loyalty, Lex continues to have nightmares of his time in the asylum and worries that one day, Clark will leave him—or that the rescue was entirely in his head.

Notes

Ever since *Asylum* first aired, I've dreamed about an alternate universe where Clark breaks Lex out of Belle Reve, and they carve out a life together somewhere. I mentioned it to my long-time friend Vera, who said I should write it. So, more than a decade later, here is that story.

Clark is 16 when this story begins, but nothing happens between them until he's a couple days shy of 18. The opening section contains actual show dialogue, included for context. I researched Canadian immigration law in the early 2000s, but this undoubtedly contains errors, which I hope you can overlook for the purpose of this story. The title is from *What You Wish For* by Guster.

Thank you to Vera for half a lifetime of friendship and for the beta, and to my artist ctbn60 for the cover!

Written for the Smallville Big Bang | Writing Playlist (now on Spotify!) | Inspiration Board

See the end of the work for more notes

"I know your secret," Lex whispers, ecstatic. "Don't worry. I haven't said a word to anyone. I need you to get me out of here. I've seen what you can do. The car hit you at sixty miles an hour, and you tossed it like a toy. Breaking me out is not going to be too much of a challenge."

"Lex, I want to—"

"Then do it, Clark. My father's never going to let me out. You're my friend. Please, Clark. Don't let me rot in this cesspool."

Clark is quiet for a long time. Lex's hands tighten on his arms. Clark has a sick, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He can't leave Lex here. He can't. They're drugging him, and there's no telling what Lionel is capable of. His parents think this is for the best, that the institution will help Lex get better, but Clark knows it's deeper than that. This is about control.

He swallows hard and shakes his head for the security cameras, for anyone who might be watching them. He shakes his head but catches Lex's eyes, opens his wider, mouths, "Okay."

Present Day

Some mornings, Clark wakes up angry.

Of course, he never says he's angry, but Lex can read it in the stiff line of his back. He's quiet, shuffles into the kitchen to make coffee, stands next to the machine with a palm on the counter. He takes deep, even breaths that he lets out through his mouth. His eyes are closed, and the breaths come out unevenly. Beside his hand, in a nondescript coffee machine they picked up at a discount store, the coffee drips and drips.

He drinks it in bed or he drinks it standing next to the open kitchen window, above the sink. He spins the wedding band on his left ring finger. Lex sits alone at the kitchen table and scans headlines from yesterday's paper.

Clark stands at the kitchen window, shirtless, in just a pair of dark green boxers. Lex's coffee goes cold. Those are the hard days.

But there are good days. Most of them are good days. They wake up together, and Clark brings Lex coffee in bed. They drink and watch the news before Lex gets up to check his email. He's pulling in a steady income, now that they have reliable Wi-Fi. They can even go out to dinner sometimes, and Clark has a new suit. He's got a job interview next week with the newspaper. They only publish once a week, but at least it will be writing—something Clark desperately wants to do again. They've talked about how important it is that he maintain a low profile, so there won't be any features. It'll mostly consist of the unglamorous stuff: obituaries, maybe the occasional opinion piece. But it's the field Clark loves. That's what matters. He's been smiling about it for a week.

They haven't heard anything about LuthorCorp, not in a year. Maybe they finally stopped looking. Maybe it's the calm before the storm. Either way, Lex is on edge. They can't hide forever, though they try. One day, someone will spot Clark crossing the border, dashing across Kansas farmland toward his home, and Lionel will find out.

He has no doubt that Lionel will find out.

And what will happen to Clark then? If Lionel was willing to leave his son, his own son, in Belle Reve—

There's no telling what he would do to someone who isn't human. The thought of Clark on his back, strapped to that metal table—the very

idea turns Lex's stomach. He buries his face in Clark's shoulder, strong and warm and smooth. He fumbles his coffee mug between shaking hands. Clark takes it from him, sets it aside—Lex hears it set down with a dull clink—and cradles Lex against his chest.

They don't talk in moments like this. There's nothing to say. *I'm sorry* doesn't mean anything, not between them. They're both sorry for so many things: for the lies, for the deceit. Clark might have told Lex his secret, in his own time. Lex wishes he'd given Clark the chance to do that. And he knows Clark regrets not having said something to Lex sooner, regrets not trusting him.

They can only trust each other now.

Clark kisses the top of his head, not like his mother used to do, not like Lex is a child: Clark kisses him like Lex is a man, a man Clark loves.

Lex loves him. He thinks he's always loved him, since childhood, since Clark reached out a small hand as the pick up truck rumbled over the dirt road, uncurled it, and touched Lex's newly bald scalp. Clark hadn't thought him ugly then and doesn't think him ugly now. He continues to kiss Lex until he relaxes, and the anxiety passes.

"Okay?" Clark asks. He keeps his voice quiet and calm. Lex presses his ear to Clark's chest and listens to his heart. It isn't so very different from his own. He nods into Clark's skin, against his pectoral muscle. Leans up to kiss him.

"Yes," he whispers into the corner of Clark's mouth.

Today is a good day.

2003

"Um," Clark says, scratching his cheek. He stands over Lex, watching as he pokes seeds into finger-sized holes in the earth, one after the other, side-by-side. "That's not how you're supposed to do it."

Lex sinks his fingers into the soil and glares at Clark over his shoulder.

"You're the farmer's son, Clark. Why don't you get your hands dirty and help?"

"Can't," Clark says. "I'll be late for work."

"Call out," Lex says with a frown and knocks soil into each of the holes, pats the surface smooth. He resents when Clark is soft with him. He stands up and brushes his fingertips off on his pants. It's laundry day. It doesn't matter. He frown deeper and turns toward Clark.

"Rent's due," Clark explains with a shrug, but he knocks Lex on the shoulder. "See you later?"

"I'll leave a plate for you in the fridge," Lex says. He tastes pasta and cheap sauce from last night, even though he's brushed his teeth twice. He runs a tongue over them.

"If you're still up, we can read the end of that book."

Lex doesn't mention he finished it yesterday while Clark worked. "I'll try to stay up," he promises, even though he knows he'll be asleep on the couch when Clark gets home from a day of shelving boxes. Manual labor doesn't flatter Clark's intellect, but it's easy work, and it pays well enough to keep them housed and fed. Clark was hired on a smile and the flex of his arm.

Lex pulls in what he can doing odd jobs around the building for cash, but it's been hard finding something steady. They entered Canada legally, even went through the process to extend their stay and get Clark a work visa. Lionel had already frozen Lex's major accounts before Lex was able to get to a phone and have funds transferred. They have some money but not a lot, enough to get them through the first year if they're frugal, enough to pay their application fees. The money is offshore in a Swiss bank where it's harder for Lionel to trace, but Lex doesn't trust anyone. He only touches the account when absolutely necessary, routing the funds through two different banks before he withdraws it.

"We could get ordained," he suggested to Clark after two months. "We don't need a work permit if we're ministers."

"Lex," Clark said with reproach and effectively ended that conversation.

He's standing at the front door, opened into the hallway, too big for sixteen.

"You gonna be okay?" Clark asks, looking concerned. It irritates Lex, who frowns and goes to the sink to wash his hands.

"Contrary to popular belief, I'm not made of porcelain," he calls across

the room.

"I know," Clark says, shuffling his feet. "I just worry about you."

"Go to work," Lex orders and lets the water run until the door closes.

Clark leaves, and Lex waters the seeds with a drinking glass. He makes his bed and the fold-out couch where Clark sleeps. They intended to trade off, but Clark insists it's easier to keep his things in one spot. Lex knows he's just being nice, that Clark sees him as damaged and wants to help. It doesn't, doesn't change anything between them or anything Lionel did, but it makes Clark feel better, so Lex plays along. He takes the bed and makes the apartment into a home while Clark is at work. He gathers the scratchy towels and the trail of clothes Clark left on the bathroom floor. He combines them with his own, a few pairs of inexpensive pants and rumpled shirts they bought at a thrift shop.

"The scrubs are a little conspicuous," Clark told him, flipping through a clothing rack.

"You were the one with the rescue plan," Lex sniffed. "You should've brought a change of clothes."

"I was a little more concerned with getting you out of there," Clark said. It was light, but there was tension on his face, in the way his eyebrows furrowed. He stopped on a gray shirt.

Lex touched his elbow. "I know," he said.

"This isn't purple, but it's nice," Clark said and held it to Lex's chest.

Lex strokes the shirt in the laundry basket, an ill-fitting v-neck cotton tee. He wears it at least once a week, despite the way it hangs on his body, which is getting skinnier and less toned as the months pass. He could go out running, but it would mean a sturdier pair of shoes, which don't seem as important as laundry detergent and toilet paper.

He's never wanted for anything material, not in his entire life, and he doesn't especially want for anything now. It's different, is all. He was always a lonely child, surrounded by too many empty, beautiful things. Now he's surrounded by a shabby apartment, clean but threadbare furniture, a refrigerator that's 80% empty, and Clark.

Of course, Clark hasn't changed at all. Not physically, at least. He wakes up every morning with the same bright-eyed expression, makes

himself toast and juice, and leaves crumbs on the sofa that Lex vacuums away. They've been on the run for six months, and Clark looks exactly the same. The change in diet—they can't afford anything like the meals Martha would make and often make-do on pasta—hasn't affected his weight or skin. He's hopeful and doting, sweetly apologetic.

"It's not forever, Lex," he promises. He believes it.

A little over ten months after their escape, they have enough money for a cheap TV. Clark finds one used that a neighbor is selling and carries it inside. He fiddles with the cable and pokes at the buttons until it crackles on, a static news feed. They get three channels, and the reception is questionable, but sitting shoulder-to-shoulder next to Clark on the sagging couch becomes a nightly ritual.

"Don't put your feet on the coffee table," he chastises, but Clark does it regardless.

"My legs are too long," he complains. "Are you cold?"

Lex notices the goosebumps on his arm when Clark touches him. "I—a little, I guess."

"I'll get a blanket," Clark says, bounding off the couch.

There's no point in refusing. Clark brings a blanket, and he wraps it around Lex's shoulders carefully, crosses the edges on his chest. "Better?" he asks and flops back onto the sofa beside him.

No one has been this kind to Lex since his mother died, and it causes a small, sad thing to rise up in his chest, a thing that makes his eyes sting and his throat hurt. He nods, lets himself slouch against Clark's arm as the news plays.

It's sleeting the first time Clark climbs into his bed, an early March storm, the steady pat pat pat of it striking the thin glass pane. The window leaks; he can feel a stream of air every time the wind blows. He keeps the curtains jammed down tight. Clark has talked about putting bubble wrap on the glass as insulation, but Lex isn't that desperate, not yet.

Clark's footsteps are conspicuous, even though he's trying to be quiet. The clock reads just past two in the morning. Lex presumes he's just

coming in to use the bathroom, but Clark approaches the bed, lifts the blanket, sits down with as much stealth as his bulk allows. Lex is instantly awake, sitting up and holding the sheet against his bare chest.

"Clark?" he asks. His voice sounds wrong and dry. "What's wrong?"

"Cold," Clark says, but he radiates heat. He's turned away from Lex, but his shoulders heave in the moonlight. He's shaking, miserable with it. Lex hears him sniff and knows he's crying.

"Hey," Lex says, touching his shoulder. "Hey."

It's a long time before Clark rolls onto his back, but he does, stares up at the ceiling.

"I miss them," he says and wipes his nose with the back of his hand.

Lex grimaces but doesn't say anything, pats Clark's shoulder consolingly and says, "I know you do."

"I know I can't call them. I know your dad probably has the farm monitored, but I just keep thinking how upset my parents must be."

"Clark, I wouldn't blame you if you want to go home. What you've done for me—I can never repay you."

Clark turns his head so that he's looking at Lex's face. His expression is sad. He sucks on his lower lip, then looks back at the ceiling.

"Do you think we can go home, one day?" he asks.

Lex strokes his thumb over Clark's shoulder without much thought. "I hope so," he says.

Clark pats Lex's hand, leaves his own on top of it, warm and large and reassuring.

"Can I stay in here" he asks.

"Sure," Lex answers. He's surprised but happy. It's warmer with Clark next to him, and there is something comforting in listening to him breathe just a foot away. He'd liked that about Helen, listening to her breathe. It's lonely breathing by himself, even with Clark just a room apart.

Clark's fingers curl around the edge of his palm like he's going to push

Lex's hand away, but he stops moving and simply holds it.

"Kay," he murmurs. He sounds content. "Night, Lex."

"Goodnight," Lex whispers. He lies on his arm, bent under his head, and stares at their hands long, long after Clark falls asleep.

"I have an idea," Lex announces a few days before Christmas, their second in the apartment.

Clark looks up from where he's fiddling with a strand of colored lights he dug out of the trash and raises both eyebrows. Lex slinks to the couch and perches on the arm, folding his arms over his chest as he regards Clark's progress.

"There's probably a burned-out bulb," Lex says, nodding toward it. "You won't get it to work unless you have a replacement."

"I know," Clark says with a sigh and lays the strand of lights on the floor. He stands up and stretches. "What's your idea?" he asks.

"I thought you might write a letter to your parents, let them know you're okay. If you take it far away from here to mail it, they shouldn't be able to trace it back to us."

"I could," Clark says. He looks away, toward the window, and rubs his neck. "Or I could go home," he says, quieter.

"They'll expect it," Lex tells him firmly, but he tries to keep his voice kind.

"Yeah," Clark says and picks at his sleeve.

"You can go," Lex stresses, though what he wants to say is *don't leave me, don't ever leave me*.

Clark snorts, regards Lex with a tilted head and a grin. "What kind of Christmas would you have without me?"

"A quiet one," Lex says with a wink.

"Just for that, you're wearing reindeer antlers."

"I don't think so," Lex says.

"I'm stronger than you," Clark reminds him.

"Non-consensual holiday cosplay," Lex says with a cluck of his tongue. "That's a merry plan, Clark."

"You're no fun," Clark complains.

"Maybe you should've left me in the asylum," Lex says thoughtlessly, the words spilling from his mouth before he can think to keep them inside. He reads heartbreak on Clark's face, in the way it darkens and twists, shadows over in mourning. He dips his head and resumes fiddling with the lights, pulling too tightly. He crushes a bulb between his fingers.

"This is a lost cause," he mutters and throws the string against the wall, then catches his head in his hands. He breathes for a few minutes.

Lex watches the rise and fall of his back, the obvious tension in his shoulders. Clark is angry—of course he's angry, he's just given the last year and a half of his life to keep Lex safe—but it's more than that. He's hurt. When he breathes, it's unsteady. Lex thinks of crawling over to him, wrapping Clark in his arms, the way Clark pulled him from the river.

But he doesn't go any closer, uncertain if Clark would allow it, if it's appropriate, why he's thinking of doing it at all. They're walking a dangerous path, the same one they always walked, but it's different now that they live together. The line between them is blurred. Clark is seventeen and kneeling on the carpet in front of him.

Lex doesn't apologize. He rubs his scalp, trails his fingertips over the bumps and scars, over his neck to his heart. He leaves it there.

"I'm going for a run," Clark announces, flat, toneless. Lex doesn't look up as he leaves.

He doesn't know how long Clark will be gone. The last time he went running, he was gone for three days. Lex suspects Clark was inspecting the border between the United States and Canada, determining the safest place for reentry, if they were to attempt it. What if he's going home? What if he's already halfway to Kansas, to see his family? What if he doesn't come back?

You have to come back. He sends his plea to the heavens.

Lex throws away the broken strand of lights and sweeps the floor, washes the few dishes they used at breakfast. He waters the basil plant

that has started to droop, crushes a leaf between his fingers. He pulls the sheets from the pull-out couch and puts them in the laundry basket, rummages through drawers for loose change, and carts two bags to the laundromat.

He skims a faded tabloid magazine while he waits for the dryer to finish—he's perfected the art of making everything fit into a single machine. It doesn't quite dry their clothes, but it eliminates the majority of the water. When he gets home, he strings them up in the living room and the bathroom, drapes them over obliging chairs and the couch, over the shower curtain rod. His hands still smell like basil.

Clark comes home when Lex is hanging the last few pieces on the edge of the tub. He comes into the bathroom without a word and stands in the doorway, watching.

"I left dinner for you in the microwave," Lex tells him without turning around.

"I'd do it again," Clark says. His voice is low and rough. Lex frowns and turns to look at him over his shoulder. Clark's expression is unreadable, his eyes wild.

"Do what again?" Lex asks, though he thinks he already knows.

"Break you out," Clark says. It comes out fierce, possessive. He clenches his hands and takes a breath. Lex stands up slowly, fearful of spooking him, uncertain of Clark's mental state.

"You're a good friend," he says carefully. "I shouldn't have said that, earlier."

"I'd break you out again," Clark says with determination. "I'd break you out, and I'd live here with you. I'd do this all again."

Lex suddenly feels very, very small. His vision relaxes, and it's like he's moving backward, and the whole bathroom swimming into focus. He blinks and his eyes are wet with emotion. They sting at the edges.

"I know," he whispers.

"No, you don't," Clark says. "That's the problem."

"I didn't mean for you to give up your life," Lex says. He's never said that before, but it's the truth.

"Being with you isn't giving up," Clark snaps.

Lex stares at him in wonder. He can't control the quiver in his chin, the way his lip shakes. No one has ever—

"So stop thinking you don't deserve it."

Clark falls silent, apparently having said what he needed to. Lex curls his fist into the shower curtain. It's cheap vinyl and reeks of plastic; his palm sweats against it, but he holds fast. Clark's eyes are hard and his face is hard, but there's a longing in the miserable downturn of his mouth.

"I want you to be happy," Lex offers after several minutes.

"I want you to be safe," Clark counters immediately.

Lex bites his lip and nods. He closes his eyes. He knows he's swaying on his feet. He sat in a kneeling position for too long, and he didn't eat lunch. His blood sugar is low. He sways on his feet, and then Clark's arms come around him, catching him before the tile floor, before the vanity can. He's floating, weightless, and comes to land on a cloud. Something warm is lying next to him.

"I'd do it again," Clark repeats with his forehead pressed to Lex's. His breath is Lex's breath.

"I'd want you to."

Lex wakes in bed with Clark and doesn't question it. Clark is turned toward him, one arm tucked under his pillow and the other between them on the mattress. Lex holds his breath and studies it. Clark hardly looks any different now from the day they met when he was just fifteen, already impossibly strong, impossibly secretive. Their first words to each other were lies.

Now what lies between them is sapping tension. He's not sure how to resolve it. No. That's not true. It would end if Clark goes home.

It's selfish that he wants Clark to stay with him, that he expects Clark to give up his life and his family and his future. To give up his friends and the town he's always known. But here, nobody knows them. Lex isn't a billionaire's son, and Clark isn't the boy left tied up in a cornfield. They're getting a chance at normalcy that Kansas couldn't provide. In that light, this is a blessing. If they had stayed in Kansas,

they never would have shared a space like this, or sat on the couch at night watching television, and Clark would never carry Lex to bed or lie down with him. And they would never—

His chest constricts. Lex reaches out and gently curls his fingers around the edge of Clark's hand. He falls back asleep holding it.

Christmas morning is cold and relatively uneventful. They didn't bother with the tree, but Clark tunes into the channel playing a video of a fireplace and a burning log, along with holiday music. They listen to it while they drink their coffee and elbow each other on the couch.

Lex cooks eggs, and while Clark is washing the dishes, the sink plugs up. Lex spends a delightful twenty minutes of watching Clark on his back under the kitchen cabinet with the bucket, cleaning out the trap. His face and hair and shoulders are soaking wet when he climbs out. They mop up the water under the cabinet together, replace the cleaning supplies and just soap, and Clark goes to clean up.

He pads back into the living room with a bag held in his hands and a sheepish expression.

"I know we said no gifts," he disclaimers before shoving it at Lex and stepping back a couple feet, shuffling his weight.

It's a plastic bag from a mid range department store. It's floppy. Lex doesn't even need to open it to know it's clothes, but he teases open the edge, unfolds the bag, and slides out the contents. It's a cashmere sweater, charcoal gray, with a slight V-neck. He strokes a hand over it for a long minute and is quiet.

"It was on sale," Clark says hurriedly, like he's afraid Lex might reject it. "It looked like you."

Lex's quiet for another few seconds, so Clark adds, "I still have the receipt. We can take it back."

They can't afford this. They can't afford it, but Lex can't afford to tell Clark he can't accept it. He brings it to his chest and squeezes.

"It's beautiful. Thank you, Clark."

Clark's smile lights up brighter than any damn tree.

Lex wears holes into the sweater. He finds himself pulling it on daily,

even when he's doing mundane household tasks. It's warmer than any of the clothes they picked up at the thrift store. Once a week, he hand washes it with mild soap he picks up at the grocery store. He hangs it to drip dry in the bathroom.

After a few weeks, the undersides of his forearms develop small pills. He buys a sweater comb and diligently works them out. He's never worn a piece of clothing so many times that it became damaged. He questions his previous lifestyle. It was more than exorbitant—it was wasteful. He thinks so if sweaters and shirts and ties and shoes he wore just once, perhaps twice. They're likely still in Smallville, in the mansion, in the closet where his housekeeper placed them. He didn't even put away his own clothes. What a child.

It's an ill-fitting sweater, but it's the most beautiful thing he owns, and it's from Clark. He tries to picture what Clark must have looked like, standing in the department store in front of a table of folded sweaters. He imagines Clark running a hand over each choice until he came to this one, and something about it told him it was intended for Lex. Clark wouldn't have bought it at random. He put thought into it, and that's what makes this sweater the best gift Lex has ever received.

The elbows wear thin first. He pulls the front when it catches on a cabinet knob but he's able to work it back through with the crochet needle. He buys three in different sizes and a soft ream of yarn. He learns to use the needle and yarn while Clark is at work, starting with a simple shape: a rectangle. He works the yard until he has a long, long stretch of uneven, nobby stitches. But it's warm, and the yarn is as soft as cashmere. The work-in-progress sits on the windowsil, beside the potted herbs and a collection of rocks Clark has brought home. Lex drapes the end result around Clark’s neck after two weeks of progress, and he's delighted to see him trot off to work every morning with it tucked into his jacket.

He makes a hat for himself. Clark is right—he shouldn't go outside with his head uncovered. It's too conspicuous. So he makes a hat that matches Clark's scarf and tugs it down over his ears. It's a little scratchy, and he admits he looks a tad ridiculous when he catches sight of himself in the plate-glass window outside the hardware store. But it allows him the freedom of stepping outside, something he hasn't done much of since he left the sanatorium. The yarn carries the scent of home.

They walk through town. Lex feels uncomfortable every time someone turns to look at them, but Clark appears at home, smiling easily and

nudging Lex's arm with an elbow. At one point, he grabs Lex by the shoulder to keep him from stepping into the street. Lex hadn't been paying attention, distracted by the snow and the holiday decorations still in place, though it's mid-January. He didn't see the car that whizzed by them.

"Thanks," he says, heart leaping into his throat.

"Don't mention it," Clark says lightly, though there's worry on his face, in the way his eyebrows are pinched. He keeps Lex close to his side until they return to the apartment.

They make a stop at the local store for groceries. They're humble shoppers, typically restricting themselves to staples like bread and cheese. But Clark picks up a two pack of steaks and puts it in their basket. Lex raises an eyebrow but doesn't question him.

Clark follows Martha's example, seasons them with salt and pepper, sears them in the frying pan with a dollop of butter to finish. It might be the best steak Lex has ever had, despite the fact that it's an inexpensive cut: too much connective tissue. He smiles at Clark as he chews and thinks this might be the happiest he's ever been.

No. He's *certain* of it.

Clark's fingers brush his as they relax on the couch to watch a movie after dinner. By the time the credits roll, Clark is holding his hand. It's sweet, almost brotherly. When Clark laughs, his fingers tighten. Lex marvels at his control, knowing that if Clark wanted or if he became distracted, he could break Lex's hand. A cough is all it would take. But he doesn't feel scared being this close to Clark.

They don't talk about it. Lex's hand feels empty when Clark turns toward him, asks "Popcorn?" and gets up to microwave a bag. But when he comes back with a bowl, he sets it on his lap, eats with his right hand, and takes Lex's in his left.

Clark's birthday sneaks up even though Lex marked it on the calendar in red ink at the beginning of January. Two days before the big eighteen, he wakes up to the realization that he has no gifts for Clark, not even a card. It's cold outside despite being May, so Lex tugs on the thickest jacket he can find and trudges to the grocery store. He browses the measly selection of greeting cards, most of them trite, several offensive, several inappropriate. None of them accurately describe his relationship to Clark. They're not family, but they're not

just friends. They're not together, and yet—

They're Clark and Lex. What they have isn't something that can be easily defined; not by greeting cards, at least.

He selects one with a dog on the front and a blank interior. Whatever he scrawls will be more authentic than words written by someone earning minimum wage at Hallmark. He picks up a cheap pack of black pens. The only ones they own were swiped from various businesses around town. It turns out Clark has sticky fingers when writing utensils are involved. He thinks better of it, puts down the box, and selects a little nicer one—it's the refillable kind with a soft grip. He pictures it pinched between Clark's fingers, scribbling notes for an interview. A pen isn't much of a gift, but this seems thoughtful. It seems like Clark. Ordinarily, Lex would've gone with something extravagant—another car, maybe, if he had access to his funds. This doesn't cost $10, but it's more intimate than anything Lex could've afforded with millions.

He carries it to the counter and pays with cash, drumming his fingers on the newspaper the clerk laid aside. Her phone's screen is still lit up. She's been surfing the Internet on the job. A chill goes through him when he recognizes the LuthorCorp logo on what looks like a news article, streaking down his arms and legs as panic. He wets his lips and holds his hand out for the change.

The clerk catches his eye as she places the coins in his palm. He curls his fingers around them, mutters thank you, and quickly thrusts his hand in his pocket. But he's not fast enough. Her eyes open just a little wider, wide enough to give away what she's thinking. He smiles at her, tight lipped.

"How was your winter?" she asks.

Lex answers as he takes a step backwards, adjusts his hat. "It was fine, thank you. Yours?"

He glances around himself nervously, hoping for another patron to approach the counter, distract her, but no luck.

"It was okay," she replies easily. She frowns, just barely, but her expression is still somehow friendly. "It's the funniest thing," she says. "For a second, I thought you might be someone else."

"Oh?" Lex croaks. The muscles around his mouth tug into a smile from memory, the kind he used to plaster on during board meetings or for

Lionel or in front of his mother as she lay dying. "Who might that be?"

"It's sad, actually," she says. "Some billionaire's son. Dad locked him up in an asylum and left him there—can you believe it?"

Lex tries to appear surprised, shaking his head vigorously, raising his eyebrows. Heat blooms on his cheeks, spreads across his face as guilt.

"He went missing about a year and a half ago," she continues. "They think his best friend broke him out."

"Of an asylum?" Lex says. He clucks his tongue in reproach and holds up the bag to indicate he's leaving. "Sounds like a security increase is in order. Have a good one."

"You too," she calls after him, eyes tracking him all the way out the door.

His cheeks and neck are on fire by the time he reaches the apartment, yanks off his hat, and collapses onto the floor. He reaches behind him and fumbles the lock closed. Clark is at work and won't be home for a couple of hours, but he has to come home now.

They can't stay here anymore. They're going to have to pack all of this up and leave. If she says something, even an offhanded comment to the wrong person—

There's no telling what Lionel is capable of, if he gets Lex back.

He takes out his phone and dials Clark, squeezing his eyes closed and muttering *Pick up, pick up dammit*.

"Lex?" Clark says, obviously concerned. His voice is low and muffled, like he's holding his hand around the speaker to keep their conversation private. "Is something wrong?"

"You need to come home," Lex blurts. "We'll talk when you get home."

"I don't get off for another hour," Clark says, a question in his voice.

"Come home now," Lex orders. "Don't ask me why. Just come home."

He's paced trails in the living room carpet by the time Clark bursts through the door, locks it behind him, and plants himself in front of Lex. He gently holds onto Lex's arms, angles his head down until he meets Lex's eyes.

"Are you alright? What happened?"

"There was another story," he begins. The words sound clumsy.

"There have been stories before."

Lex swallows thickly, presses a fist against Clark's chest.

"The checkout clerk at the grocery store. She recognized me."

Clark goes still. His heartbeat picks up against Lex's fingers.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Clark, she practically told me our story."

Clark lets go of his arms and collapses onto the sofa, letting his head fall back. He covers his face with both hands and is quiet for a long time. Lex watches him from the center of the room, shifting his weight back and forth, back and forth. When Clark takes his hands away, Lex can see that he's crying.

"We've been so careful."

Lex nods in agreement, lets his back rests against the wall. It's cold and unforgiving, like Lionel. Like Belle Reve.

"I was just starting to like it here," Clark says with a bitter laugh. It sounds ugly coming out of his mouth. Clark shouldn't laugh like that.

"We—we wouldn't have to leave right away," Lex stammers.

It shocks him. Of *course* they have to leave. They have to leave immediately, but—

"What?" Clark asks, head snapping up.

Lex's mouth is dry and uncomfortable, and his heart beats like it did after the accident, an erratic thrumming.

"Maybe," he offers. He doesn't know why he's saying this. Clark won't believe it because Lex doesn't believe it himself. "Maybe she won't say anything."

"We can't trust anyone, Lex."

Clark's statement is final, rolling in his gut like nausea. If Lex hadn't

remembered Clark's secret, Clark wouldn't have told him. He wouldn't have told him. He'd still be in the dark.

He stumbles into the bedroom and pulls out drawer after drawer, staring helplessly at the contents. He doesn't recognize them. Are these his things? They have to leave, and he can only take what he can carry. The television and the comforter and the plants on the windowsill: he can't carry any of them. Lex splays his fingers into a starburst and lets it rest against the neatly folded pile of shirts.

"It'll be okay."

Clark is standing behind him, large and warm. Lex nods toward his own chest.

"We can take a day," Clark says more gently. "Get some boxes."

"I'm fine," Lex assures him.

He jumps when Clark hugs him from behind but doesn't step out of it.

"Let's lie down," he says. "You're cold."

"I'm fine," Lex says again, wiggling his shoulders to free himself, but Clark holds tight, though not tight enough to bruise.

"I'm not," he admits. "Please?"

Clark kisses his forehead when they're settled. He cups Lex's face in his hands. It temporarily quiets the panic. Clark is fragrant with the outdoors, plastic and cigarette smoke. It's a potpourri of his working environment. It's not a pleasing combination but it's comforting, different from the way Clark used to smell on the farm, the mildew-sweet stench of the barn. This smell is industrial, almost odious. But it arouses something in him and causes a shiver. It's the way Clark smells when he's with Lex. He closes his eyes and lets himself breathe it in.

Clark kisses from Lex's forehead to his temple, to his cheek. He kisses the tip of Lex's nose and the corner of his mouth, then the other. He hovers millimeters away, tensing. Lex feels each exhalation against his lips. Slowly, slowly, Clark leans in. It's barely a kiss, tentative and frightened. It can't possibly be Clark's first, but it has Lex's heart racing so fast he thinks he might faint.

Clark's lips tremble against his. He guides his face side to side, so their

movements become a caress.

"Is this okay?" he asks after a while.

It's a whisper, and this is so much more than okay, but Lex can only move his head in reply. *Yes*, he thinks, kissing back with urgency, desperate for Clark to know that *yes, yes, this is okay*.

Clark gasps relief as he pulls Lex tighter against him, and Lex is warm, warm, warmed through to his core.

It's late, well past dark, and Clark is not in bed when Lex opens his eyes. He squints into the dark and listens for movement: footsteps, running water, anything that will tell him if Clark is in the apartment. There is a swish of passing cars, and the howl of wind, clang of pipes somewhere in the building but not their unit.

Maybe Clark has gone back to his own bed and is asleep there. This is in its infancy, this thing between them. Maybe he doesn't feel comfortable sleeping next to Lex anymore, after what happened. Maybe he regrets it. The thought pains Lex, but he was upset. Clark was upset. It's not outside the realm of possibility that Clark has changed his mind, acted in the heat of the moment, not out of desire but pity. He pulls back the covers, shivers at the cold shock of air, and pads out to the living room.

The couch isn't pulled out, and Clark isn't lying on it.

"Clark?" he calls, pausing in the door to his bedroom. He rests a hand on the doorjamb as support and listens.

Clark doesn't answer him.

He calls again, louder, in case Clark is in the bathroom—maybe he's fallen asleep in there. Lex has done that plenty of times. But there's no answer, just the dark, empty apartment staring back at him.

He curls up in the corner of the couch and pulls a blanket over his legs, wraps his arms around his knees and waits. It's only nine-thirty, not as late as he thought. When he first opened his eyes, it might have been three in the morning. Clark probably went out for food. They never ate dinner. He didn't want to wake Lex and will be right back. He'd never leave, not like this, without a goodbye.

He stares at the black television screen but doesn't reach for the

remote, telling himself that if he moves, he'll change something in the air. He sits stock still, like he sat in his cell, and waits, arms tightly around his knees like a straight jacket. The blanket pulls taut across his shoulders and reminds him of being strapped in. It's irrational, but he begins to hyperventilate, mouth open and gasping for air.

The walls around him are devoid of their things. Gone are the photographs, the pages torn from magazines that Clark affixed to the wall with invisible tape. The walls are bare white, dingy and in need of a new coat of paint. They are stark, textured and—

Padded, and the floor is padded, and the wall before him isn't a wall. It's glass. He's in the asylum, curled around his own body, rocking himself and waiting, waiting. He stands and stumbles toward the glass. His fingernails create moon-shaped grooves in his palms; that pain is the only thing he is certain of.

"Lex?"

Clark's voice is frantic, cutting through the blinding white, through the antiseptic fog of the hospital.

"Clark?" Lex asks, but he can't see Clark, can't see anything but the white.

And then Clark's palms are on his cheeks, and Clark's forehead is pressed to his, and Clark is kissing him, whispering, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Lex. I went to get dinner."

He smells meat and something fried, something sweet like pie. He can't see Clark, but he can feel him. Clark's fingers are gentle as they cradle his jaw, tilt his chin back. Clark kisses him and tastes cold, like the night air.

"Lex," Clark pleads. "Hey."

Clark takes his hand and works his fingers open, lays a kiss on Lex’s palm, over the places where his skin throbs.

"Next time I’ll leave you a note," he promises. "I didn’t think you’d wake up. I was only gone a few minutes."

"It's fine," Lex says when he finds his voice. He certainly overreacted. "I should've known."

But he hadn't because of their past, and Clark knows this. Their trust

is still fractured.

"We should eat," Clark suggests.

His voice is strained. He tries to smile, but it stretches thinly across his teeth. Lex touches him to ensure he's real. Clark holds still, letting Lex drag his fingers across Clark's lip. It's chapped and rough where it rests against his bottom teeth. Clark's breath is warm. He pants against Lex's fingers.

"Where are we going to go?" he murmurs.

Lex stills his hand and curls his fingers toward his palm, and he lets his arm fall limp at his side.

"I don't know," he says.

He is sitting on the floor. He doesn't remember sitting down, but Clark is kneeling next to him.

"Let's get some food in you," he says. His voice is gentle, but he doesn't offer a suggestion. It's a fact: Lex will eat. Clark will see to it. He sighs his resignation and crawls the short distance to the coffee table, where the food is laid out. He doesn't remember that either.

"Do you think you ought to see someone?" Clark suggests, timidly, wiping grease from his chin with a thin paper napkin. "We can look, once we get settled in."

Settling in means another apartment in another city, a bedroom that isn't this bedroom, one that doesn't hold the memory of the first time Clark kissed him.

It's an absurd reason to cry, but it's the reason his chin quivers and tears leak down his face, pool along the seam of his lips. He holds still, because if he is still they might not fall, and if they don't fall, he can pretend they aren't real. Lex's eyes flutter closed and he looks down on the mansion gardens, on a useless vegetable plot, a farmer's son holding a crate of produce.

"Lex?" Clark calls.

His voice is small and contained, neatly packaged away. The produce boy's lips don't move.

"Lex?" Clark's voice calls again, insistent. So insistent. Frantic. Clark

sounds scared.

Is someone hurting him? Someone must be hurting Clark. By extension, they have hurt Lex too.

He can't see Clark to help him, can only breathe in deeply, let it out in an extended sigh that leaves him lethargic. He had just been upset about something, only he can't remember what it was or why he is sitting on the floor.

He is in their small apartment in Canada, and Clark is not holding vegetables. His eyes are round and wide and Clark is tied to a stake in a corn field. He takes hold of Lex's shoulder and shakes it.

"Hey, hey," he repeats. "You're scaring me. Answer me, or I'm gonna call someone."

It snaps him back, the recoil coursing through him as a shiver. His teeth chatter, arms tremble as they wrap around his middle. He rocks himself and says, "No. I'm fine. I just need a minute."

"Where did you go?" Clark asks, small. Clark is still touching him.

"What?"

"Just now," Clark says.

Lex is bewildered. Lex hasn't gone anywhere. Clark is the one who left. His teeth clack together and cause such a racket he is inclined to plug his ears. He hasn't gone anywhere, but he can't say that to Clark.

"I think I was still half asleep," he answers. He says it because it will calm Clark down, not because it is the truth.

Clark lifts his eyebrows and opens a bag of takeout. He doesn't believe Lex but doesn't question him again, doles out a chicken thigh and a chicken breast and a drumstick for himself, gives a single thigh to Lex.

"Here," he says and slides the plate across the coffee table. A peace offering.

Lex eats the chicken with his fingers. It's too hot and burns his hands, burns his tongue, burns his throat as he swallows. He still shakes.

They wake up together the next morning. Clark has gathered Lex against his side and strokes his arm and shoulder. This is nice, Lex

thinks. It's probably the nicest he's ever felt waking up with anyone.

Clark makes excuses for why they can't pick up and move immediately. He keeps his clothing in the drawers and narrow closet. He keeps going to work. He buys milk and a new color of yarn on the way home, and waters the herbs on the window sill.

He hasn't located a new apartment, he explains. He hasn't found steady work. A few more days won't hurt, he promises. If the grocery clerk had said anything, Lionel's people would be here already. LuthorCorp doesn't have sway with the Canadian government or they would've tracked them long ago through their paperwork. They can afford a few days to think, Clark says.

Lex presents Clark with his birthday gifts, and he begins to crochet Clark a new green scarf in the hours when Clark is at work. His stitches are neater this time. A few days turns into a week, and that week stretches into two weeks and then three.

A month.

Clark goes to work and comes home and whispers promises to Lex in the dark. The bedroom bears witness to kisses that go beyond the innocence of the first. Kisses that are desperate and clinging, the way that Clark clings to him, pressing open-mouthed pleas into his neck.

"Lex. *Lex*."

Clark says his name, and it is beautiful. They are beautiful the way they fit together. Clark holds him, and he holds Clark.

Clark goes to work and stops talking about when they will move, replacing the "when" with "if," as if it is no longer a certainty. Perhaps it is no longer a certainty. Lex doesn't question him.

He takes Clark in his mouth, hot and thick, holds his breath and concentrates on allowing his throat to relax. He isn't afraid. He isn't afraid of Clark. Lex is on his knees before the couch, and he can smell Clark. Taste Clark. Feel Clark's hand tense on his shoulder.

"Lex," he pants, "I'm gonna—"

It's sweet, when he does. Lex sits back, wipes his lips against the back of his hand. Clark leans forward to kiss him, folding Lex in his arms and pulling him up onto the couch, against Clark's chest.

"I love you," Clark vows. When he kisses him, Lex can almost *feel* it.

"I love you," Clark repeats, and the joy bursts from his skin.

Clark goes to work and comes home and kisses Lex hello. Lex makes pasta and finishes the scarf and continues to clean the apartment. The basil begins to bloom again, so they pinch back the flowers to prevent the leaves turning bitter. The grocery store clerk just smiles at him when Lex stops by, late one Tuesday, for bread and peanut butter.

"We've got a sale going on the store brand," she tells him at the checkout counter. She points to aisle five.

"Thank you," Lex says, meaningfully, when he comes back with the half-priced jar. He isn't talking about peanut butter.

"You're welcome. My name's Emily," she says. He suspects she isn't talking about peanut butter either.

Lex swallows thickly. There's little value in a lie at this point, so he tells a half truth.

"Alexander."

She smiles in a way that tells him she is warmed by his answer. She had expected him to lie. He is bolstered by the way her eyes flit to the counter, by the friendly crinkle at their corners. She scans his items and reads him the total. He pays with cash.

"Hope you're enjoying the warmer weather," she says, dropping change into his palm. He tucks the coins in his pocket.

"We are, thanks," Lex says. He holds up a hand in farewell. "I'll see you around."

They don't leave town. They buy a new comforter for the bed, one they both like and pick out together. It's solid gray on one side and plaid on the other. It's warm. Lex kisses Clark underneath it. He picks up a shift stocking shelves at the grocery store. He bakes a pizza with their homegrown basil and sauce he buys with his employee discount. He buys stationery and stamps and presents them to Clark over breakfast sometime in June.

"You should write them," he says. "Your parents," he adds when Clark stops, mid-chew, to raise an eyebrow.

Clark swallows the mouthful of hashbrowns and bacon and blinks owlishly.

"They deserve to know," Lex says, wetting his lips. He's nervous. He recognizes the butterflies. "They need to know that you're alright."

Clark blushes. He picks up his napkin and dabs his lips slowly, makes a show of folding it in half and then into quarters, laying it beside his plate.

"You've already written them," Lex guesses. Clark just nods. "When?"

He shrugs and focuses on something Lex can't see outside the window. "A few times," he answers, vaguely.

"Oh," Lex says. He supposes that's a good thing. "That's good," he says. He thinks he means it. "Thank you for telling me."

It's something.

"Check it out," Clark says and presents a laptop. It's still in the box. It's new. Lex sets down the book he was reading and watches, dumbly, as Clark sets the box on the floor and slices the strapping tape holding the sides closed.

"I thought," he begins, "since I work days and you work the night shift, maybe it could keep you busy during the day."

"And?" Lex prompts. He hears the unfinished thought in Clark's last syllable.

"And, I dunno," Clark says, rubbing his neck. "I thought I might try writing again."

Clark hasn't written anything but letters in two years. His voice is suffused with excitement, so Lex doesn't ask how much the computer cost.

"That's great," he praises.

"Paper's hiring," Clark goes on. He pulls styrofoam forms off either side of the laptop and hands it to Lex. "A desk job might be a nice change."

"Mmm," Lex agrees and lifts the screen. His back is sore from standing on tile for eight hours. He longs for the executive chair in his office at

the mansion. The computer powers on.

Bad days begin with Lex waking up from a nightmare where he is back in the asylum. They are frequent, even after two years. Clark holds him through the worst of the shaking, until he has to get out of bed to throw up. Then, Clark sits behind him and rubs his back.

"What was it this time?" he asks quietly. Lex's arms are draped over the seat. It is August.

"You said no," Lex answers after a long, long time. His throat burns. He needs water.

"It was just a dream," Clark murmurs.

"What if it's not?" Lex asks. "What if *that's* real, and this is what I made up?"

"Do you believe that?" Clark asks.

Lex thinks for a moment. "No," he says. Then, "Sometimes."

"You know, it's okay. To be happy," Clark tells him. "That doesn't mean you're crazy."

Lex lifts his head and peers over his shoulder, cleans the bad taste from his teeth with a swipe of his tongue. He squints. "Happy?" he repeats.

"I'm gonna call out today," Clark says.

"Don’t waste your sick days."

"Then we're doing something after work. Are you off tonight?"

Lex ticks through the days of the week in his head. Today is Wednesday, so he doesn't work again until Friday. He nods.

"Good," Clark says, kissing Lex's cheek.

He gets up and runs a glass of tap water. Lex takes it gratefully, swishes it in his mouth and spits. The water is warm and tangy from the pipes. He pours the remainder into the toilet and flushes, watches his apprehension swirl away.

"Hey," Clark says, elbowing Lex as they get ready to go out for dinner. Once a month, they do this: dinner for two at a greasy spoon around the block, but it's their form of indulgence. Lex wears his favorite sweater, and Clark combs his hair. They knock feet under the table and split gooey, day-old strawberry cake for dessert.

"Hm?" Lex hums, opening the window to see if he should bother with a jacket. There's a fall breeze, so he slings it over his arm and fishes for his hat.

"Um," Clark continues, pink-faced and eyes focusing on every surface in the apartment, everything except for Lex. He wets his lips and pats down his jeans distractedly, forehead seared into a frown.

"We're fine for money," Lex assures him, which isn't a fallacy: with the two of them working, they have more than enough for an occasional meal out, even a movie. They won't have to scramble for the rent this month, and they'll have plenty to buy Lex a good winter coat.

"No, it's—" Clark begins, then squeezes his eyes closed. He lets out a desperate, hollow laugh. "Jeez, I had this whole speech planned, and now I can't remember a word of it."

Lex stills, tightening his hands around the jacket, around the round press of buttons in his palm. So Clark has finally had enough. Lex never expected to stay here forever, didn't really believe that this could last, that Clark would actually sacrifice his life, his *future*. He's dreaded this moment since Clark stole into the asylum, since he unhooked Lex from the cold metal table, cradled him against his chest and ran. He's dreaded it since they arrived in Canada, took up their apartment, since the first time Clark held him and said things would be okay. He's dreaded this with every embrace. Every kiss is laced with it. But he'd foolishly let himself believe that Clark might stay, that he wants to.

"The thing is," Clark says, "this thing with you and me, I never..." He presses his lips together. "You were my *best friend*. I mean, you still are. You're my...when we first came here, I had no idea we'd end up like this, you know? I'd never thought about it. But now—"

"Clark," Lex interjects, his voice level but firm. He moulds his mouth into the plastic smile he used to reserve for press conferences. "I understand. What you've done for me, I can't ever repay you, and I'm not angry. I never wanted this for you. It's been..." He digs his fingernails into his palms to steady himself. "I value your friendship.

It's the most important of my life, which is why I can't ask you to do this any longer. I want you to go home. I want you to go back, to your family, to everything you left behind."

"Wait," Clark says, holding out a hand and regarding Lex with a baffled expression. "Do you think I'm breaking up with you?"

Lex doesn't allow himself to cry. He fits his teeth together and studies the linoleum floor, the joints where the tiles have drifted millimeters apart. He thinks about the hundreds and hundreds of times he's paced this floor, and locks his knees so they won't buckle. "I don't have a good history with long-distance relationships," he says once he's able to speak calmly.

"Long—Lex, no, I...*shit*," Clark curses, which is so surprising that Lex lifts his eyes to see Clark wringing his hands together. "I'm not going anywhere," he says earnestly.

"I'm confused," Lex admits.

Clark steps forward and takes Lex's hands in his, squeezes them to the point it's almost painful, and stares at his boots. "I wanna marry you," he blurts.

Lex's eyes go wide, and his mouth drops open. His chin quivers, and his heart clenches, but he manages a shaky, "W-what?"

"I wanna marry you," Clark repeats, transferring both of Lex's hands to his left, bringing his right up to cup Lex's face. "I want to keep doing this whole thing with you. I want to wake up every morning and have you here. I want to get a dog and get a new couch and buy a real Christmas tree. I want to make you happy, Lex. Please say yes."

His thumb traces a path across Lex's cheekbone, slow and reassuring. Lex leans into it.

"But your *family*," he says.

"Please say yes," Clark murmurs against his cheek.

It would be better if Clark went home, if he returned to Kansas, enrolled in MetU or Kansas University, received his journalism degree. He should find a nice girl and settle down, raise a family of his own. But the look on Clark's face is naked in its honesty, open in a way that Lex has never seen.

He allows Clark to fold him in his arms and sway. Whispers *yes* into the corner of Clark's mouth.

Another winter makes Clark restless. He probably thinks he's being nonchalant about the way he avoids looking at the television if there is a farm on the screen, or a kitchen that has similarities to his parents', but Lex notices. It's natural that Clark feels homesick over the holidays. Lex would feel homesick too, if he had grown up the way Clark had, in a house filled with good memories. He would long for them, like Clark longs for Kansas.

The week of Christmas, Lex comes home from work a little after six to find Clark still awake, huddled next to the window in the dark. The laptop is on the table. Clark's hands rest on the keyboard, but the monitor is off. Clark appears startled when Lex takes off his coat and scarf and hangs them up.

"What time is it?" he croaks, blinking.

"It's almost morning. Have you slept?" Lex replies, opening the refrigerator and getting out the milk. He pours a bowl of cereal and eats it standing up.

"I was working on my portfolio," Clark explains. He drops his face into his palms and yawns. "Lost track of the time."

"How's the writing coming along?"

"It's not," Clark admits. "I keep staring at the cursor."

"Maybe you should give it up for the night," Lex suggests. He rinses his bowl and leaves it in the sink, then drapes himself over Clark's back. He kisses the nape of his neck gently. "Let's go to bed."

Arched above him in the cocoon of their bed, Clark is tender but distant. He buries his face in Lex's neck and rocks against him, but his movements are mechanical. His mind's not there. So Lex holds him, wraps both arms around Clark's back and pulls him down until their bodies are flush. He puts his lips to Clark's temple and kisses in time with their breathing. Clark settles on top of him, melting into his chest as Lex cards his fingers through Clark's hair. When Clark speaks, his voice is soft, almost childlike.

"Do you think we can ever go back?" he whispers.

Lex closes his eyes.

x

End Notes

Hello from 2025! I have always been happy with this fic's bittersweet ending, but to celebrate its 10th birthday, I wrote it a small sequel. If you'd like a happier ending, please click through to the second work in the series.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!